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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6476
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 8370
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2096
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9595
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0564
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1216
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000345

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: EVERYONE IS TALKING, BUT IS ANYONE LISTENING?

Classified By: CDA A.I. GEETA PASI. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The long-awaited dialogue between Bangladesh's caretaker government (CTG) and the political parties is set to kick off at the end of March. For the CTG and its backers in the Bangladesh Army, the goal of the dialogue is to convince the political parties to sign on to a national charter that will ensure the continuity of reforms. For their part, the parties want assurances that national elections will be held by the end of 2008, and are skeptical of CTG plans to conduct local elections and to hold polls under a State of Emergency. There has also been increased activity of late to finalize institutional reforms desired by the Army to hedge against backsliding by the politicians, including a proposed National Security Council and a Truth Commission. We have been meeting with the parties to make clear our support for the upcoming dialogue and to reiterate the need for free, fair, and credible elections by the end of the year, as promised in the Chief Adviser's roadmap. We have also told the politicians that we believe they have a role to play, and a responsibility to be part of the solution to Bangladesh's ongoing political crisis. Our meetings with the parties have received a great deal of attention from the media, including some who accuse the USG of interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs. End Summary.

Plans for Political Dialogue Become Clearer =====

¶2. (C) Brigadier A.T.M. Amin, one of Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed's closest confidantes, recently met with CDA a.i. and outlined the GOB's current plans for the long-awaited political dialogue with the parties. Amin indicated that Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed would likely announce the start of the dialogue in an address after returning from his current trip to the OIC Summit in Dakar and a subsequent visit to the UK. Amin speculated that Fakhruddin might also take this opportunity to announce that national elections would be held in December 2008. (Note: The Chief Election Commissioner has suggested that a date will be announced after the voter list is completed in June.) The dialogue would begin with a plenary session involving several hundred representatives from the political parties, civil society, business community, and international observers. The Chief Adviser and the Chief of Army Staff will address the gathering. Other notable persons, including Nobel Laureate Professor Mohammed Yunus and noted lawyer Dr. Kamal Hossain, would also be invited to speak.

¶3. (C) Following the plenary session, a group of eminent persons would facilitate smaller group discussions with the political parties and others. The group of eminent persons includes former CTG advisers, respected academics,

and others. The goal would be to reach consensus on a national charter⁸ which would be endorsed by the plenary. This national charter would, among other things, include a promise by all to ratify the actions of the Caretaker Government during the State of Emergency. We have been told by political party representatives that discussions are underway with the government to finalize the agenda for the national dialogue and discuss the outline of the national charter. Significantly, politicians from different parties have also started talking with each other to coordinate some of their positions in advance of the dialogue.

Institutional Reforms: NSC and Truth Commission
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14. (C) In parallel to the national dialogue, the CTG is also moving ahead with long-stalled institutional reforms, including the creation of a National Security Council and the formation of a Truth Commission for corruption cases. Both initiatives are controversial, and have been the subject of much speculation in the press. The Council of Advisers has reportedly endorsed both concepts in principle, and draft ordinances are being prepared. The former is intended to institutionalize a role for the Army in decision making on issues of national security. The latter is meant to provide a mechanism for those suspected of past corruption to confess their wrongdoing and pay restitution, in exchange for immunity from prosecution. Those who participate in this process would likely also have to accept disqualification from running for office. We understand that the Truth Commission would also be utilized to regularize payments that have already been made to the government by some who have been accused of corruption.

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Sticking Points: Local Elections and Emergency
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15. (C) While the press and others have expressed reservations about the NSC and Truth Commission, the parties have been largely silent on these issues. Instead, the parties have focused their criticism on proposals to hold local elections in advance of national elections and to maintain elements of the State of Emergency throughout the remainder of the CTG period. The parties are afraid that the CTG and Army will seek to install their supporters into the local government positions and use these either to influence the results of parliamentary elections or to serve as counterweights to elected MPs. The parties are also worried that continuation of the State of Emergency will hamper their ability to reach voters in advance of elections.

16. (C) For its part, the CTG and its supporters want to hold local elections in order to inspire confidence in the minds of the people in the restoration of democracy and also to ensure that an elected government will not be able to influence the results at the local level. The GOB has been attempting to cultivate local leaders in an attempt to inject new blood into the parties and the governing structure. CTG supporters assure us that they will relax the State of Emergency before elections, but say they cannot remove it entirely for fear that this would result in court challenges to the government's legitimacy and also complicate their efforts to prosecute high profile corruption cases.

Talking with the Parties
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17. (C) In order to reinforce, both privately and publicly, our support for the restoration of democracy, the CDA a.i. has begun a round of meetings with the heads of the major political parties. The consultations began with a meeting with the Awami League Presidium and a meeting with the head of the anti-Khaleda Zia faction of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on March 9. The CDA a.i. met with the leadership

of the Jamaat Islami Bangladesh March 16 and the Jatiya Party March 18. Our meeting with the BNP,s loyalist faction is pending while the Zia-appointed Secretary General of the Party is in the U.S. for medical treatment.

¶18. (C) Our message in each of these meetings has been to reiterate the importance of national elections by the end of 2008, to stress the need for dialogue, and to acknowledge the important role (and responsibility) that the parties have in finding a solution to the current political impasse. This message has been repeated to the press, which has given front page coverage to our meetings. Not surprisingly, some of the commentary in the press has been negative, with left-leaning editorialists criticizing the USG for "interfering in Bangladesh's internal affairs." These same papers have also criticized the British and others for their statements on political issues, and were also critical of the international community's attempts to mediate during the political crisis in late 2006.

¶19. (C) Thus far, the party leadership of both the AL and the BNP has expressed a willingness to participate in the dialogue and to take part in national elections. Thus far, the parties have staked out extreme positions on local elections and the status of the two former Prime Ministers. Overall, the parties claim that they have shown restraint, but are worried that dissatisfaction among rank and file members will put pressure on them to adopt a more belligerent stance vis a vis the government. The parties have all expressed their appreciation for our initiative to reach out to them, and they have welcomed our public stance in favor of elections and dialogue.

What about the two ladies?
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¶10. (C) The future status of the two former Prime Ministers remains the difficult item to resolve, both internally within the parties and externally for the CTG. Despite increasing public speculation that one or both of the former PMs will be allowed to travel abroad for medical treatment, it appears that there are no serious negotiations currently underway with either of the ladies. Instead, the focus seems to have shifted to the national dialogue, perhaps in an effort to put pressure on the two to come to some understanding with the government.

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Advisers start packing their bags
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¶11. (C) While there are still doubts in some quarters regarding the prospects for national elections, it has become increasingly clear that the Chief Adviser and members of his Caretaker Government are preparing to leave the scene at the end of 2008. We have heard from a number of sources, including some of the Advisers themselves, that the Chief Adviser has told friends and colleagues that he will not stay in office &one day past December 31.8 Nor is there any support for the CTG,s mandate to be extended. Rather, if elections are not held by the end of 2008, we have been told that the GOB might seek to hold a referendum as a prelude to installing a &government of national unity8 to take up the reins. At present, however, this appears to be more of a contingency plan to be put in place if the parties boycott parliamentary elections.

Comment
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¶12. (C) Over the last month, we have sensed an increasing pragmatism on the part of the CTG and the Army and a realization that they need to reach some accommodation with the parties. Given Chief Adviser Fakhruddin,s insistence that he will not stay in office past December 2008, the CTG

has finally realized that it needs to play an active role in creating conditions that will lead to an election. The Army also seems intent upon tying up loose ends*such as the status of the funds it has recovered from corruption suspects, and also moving ahead with Army Chief General Moeen,s extension for at least another year. It remains to be seen whether the parties are willing (or able) to reach an understanding with the CTG on fundamental issues like the status of the two former Prime Ministers. The coming dialogue, and decisions about institutional reforms, should help determine whether or not the GOB will be able to adhere to the electoral roadmap announced in July 2007. Skepticism abounds, with more cynical observers noting that in Bangladesh dialogues often devolve into simultaneous monologues. There will be plenty of talking in the coming weeks, but the real question will be whether or not anyone is listening.

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